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The provincial press in England: an overview

It is not just Mark Twain who has been prematurely killed off. His riposte, to his own obituary in the *New York Journal* of June 2, 1897, that "the report of my death has been greatly exaggerated," might equally be applied to the provincial press. Few industries have been subject to such dire predictions as the local and regional newspaper industry. The current climate for local papers, often dismissed as 'rags', is no different. Typical of this is the attitude of media analysts FTI Consulting whose 2013 report tells of an industry in terminal decline; yet from other perspectives the provincial press remains successful. The website for the Newspaper Society (2013) lists 1,100 regional and local newspapers with 1,600 associated websites. The print products boast 31 million readers a week, more than the combined readership for the national press. And as I write, the business continues to yield substantial, albeit declining, profits.

There is no doubt that the provincial newspaper industry is partway through a transformation wrought by the digital revolution. These changes have not only undermined the traditional business model for local news, but have "radically altered virtually every aspect of news gathering, writing and reporting" (Franklin, 2013:1). As the Newspaper Society indicates, websites out-number printed products but the inability of the industry to make money from their online titles has created a complex pattern of reactions.

However, this is not the first such shift for the provincial press for whom development in the face of changing circumstances is a defining characteristic. Jeremy Black argues that the provincial press is structurally related to notions of transience because of the nature of news. This enables it to shift and react to circumstances, be they social, political, economic or, indeed, technological. In this sense, change underpins the continuity of the industry (2001:1).

We can identify key historical moments in the development of the provincial press by charting shifts in emphasis and form between elements, including business structure, content and professional practice. Some of these shifts may have promoted rapid change while others have had a slow, but equally dramatic influence. Identifying these moments enables the development of the provincial press to be theorised in six distinct stages: firstly, the local newspaper as opportunistic creation; secondly, the characterization of the local newspaper as fourth estate; thirdly, the impact of New Journalism; fourthly, the growth of chain control, fifthly, the move to computerised production and the advent of free newspapers; sixthly, the phase currently underway, the provincial press in the digital age. Nerone and Barnhurst have similarly documented the development of the US press into six phases, which are not distinct, but which "have nestled within each other in complicated ways" (2003: 439). However, charting this typology does enable us to distinguish the contingent from the permanent in the history of provincial newspapers.

The provincial newspaper as opportunistic creation

The first provincial newspapers in England were produced by printers, seeking to profit from the emerging need for news to facilitate trade which underpinned early industrial capitalism. These newspapers were entrepreneurial products filled with 'cut and paste' content from other publications and adverts for other business interests – such as 'quack' medicines – which were produced alongside the papers. One of the early publications was *Bristol Post Boy*, which was probably founded in 1702. Two pages long, it consisted largely of news taken from papers brought from the capital via stagecoach (Penny 2001).

By 1723 there were 24 recorded provincial papers in Britain (Black 2001: 9), although, of the 150 papers founded in 60 cities in England from 1701-60, half are thought to have lasted fewer than five years (Wiles1965: 25). Exact circulations for individual titles are hard to ascertain but Ferdinand (1997: 125) concludes that in the early 1700s, a sale of 200 copies was enough to keep a paper going. By the 1760s, the most successful papers had a sale of 3,000 to 4,000. These early papers were expensive –the equivalent of £15 each in today's money – and would be exchanged and read communally; readership figures therefore outstripped individual sales. Dedicated reading rooms, where people could pay to read newspapers, were extended to the provinces and in 1839 the *Leeds Mercury* estimated each of its copies was read by between 15 and 20 people (Walker 2006: 377).

In 1725 the *Gloucester Journal* claimed to reach from Llandaff in South Wales to Trowbridge in Wiltshire, Ludlow in Shropshire and Wantage in Oxfordshire, while other papers would signify wide coverage via titles, such as Jopson's *Coventry and Northampton Mercury*. As such, the content may not have been particularly 'local'.

Black (ibid) contends that most readers looked to their provincial paper to provide news of the wider world while Andrew Walker suggests that local news only gained prominence in the latter decades of the eighteenth century when there were enough competing newspapers to focus circulation areas on more defined areas (2006: 376). However, Wiles charts local content in the *Norwich Post* in 1708 as including news of the city itself (1965: 255).

These producers of newspapers were not 'journalists', acting according to yet-to-be-established professional norms, such as checking facts. However, these titles did become established as serial (numbered) products, which appeared at set time intervals (usually, although not exclusively, weekly) and which were characterized by the inclusion of time-sensitive information. In these ways, the newspaper was establishing for itself a prominent discursive function as the purveyor of 'news' via products which were a "generic hybrid between public information source, community identity and profit which constitutes journalism" (Conboy 2004: 42).

The characterization of the local newspaper as fourth estate

During the nineteenth century, the provincial newspaper developed into a low-cost, mass-circulation product. The infamous 'taxes on knowledge' had meant that newspaper ownership was restricted to those who could afford to stock up on the costly sheets of pre-stamped paper. These people often invested in newspapers for their social status and used them to campaign for the values of "polite society" (Gibb and Beckwith 1954). They were also able to specialise and concentrate on the business of newspapers alone and so form a close relationship with the communities

they sought to serve, creating a "local" press (Gardner 2008: 57). Soon after the repeal of Stamp Duty in 1855, it became economically viable to use paper supplied in bulk on a roll and to feed into the newly-developed steam presses. The removal of taxation on adverts encouraged provincial newspaper owners to further invest in mechanizing composition with the introduction of the Linotype, first used in Britain by the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* in 1889 (Milne 1971: 27).

The repeal of Stamp Duty was followed by a dramatic rise in the number of titles in addition to new forms of provincial newspaper _– the morning and evening press. Andrew Hobbs (2009) argues the provincial press formed a comprehensive communication network, enhanced via co-operation between titles, typified by the formation of the Provincial Newspaper Society in 1836, to represent the interests of owners, and the Press Association in 1868, which saw newspaper proprietors co-operate to disseminate domestic news (Hampton 2004: 36).

Increasingly ownership passed to 'joint-stock' companies, whose shareholders were able to raise the necessary capital to fund titles. In the 1850s it was estimated to cost £10,000-£20,000 to set up a London daily; 20 years later this was put at £100,000. In 1881, Robert Spence Watson, the Liberal political manager of Newcastle, reckoned £30,000 to establish a northern daily. Titles were expected to make a profit and would generate around 50 per cent of their income from advertising (Lee 1976). Key political figures, such as Liberal Andrew Carnegie, sought to establish chains of newspapers with a political stance used as a selling point in an increasingly crowded market place. Milne suggests that politics was the 'lifeblood' of these papers, which were exploited by politicians because they were "cheap, immediate and regular"

(1971: 13) at a time when the nation was debating the extension of the franchise. By the 1880s, the link between the provincial press and politics weakened as titles sought to build a mass circulation by widening their appeal (Lee 1976:162).

Significantly, the industry legitimized its social role within the rhetoric of the 'Fourth Estate'. Hampton refines this role into the more subtle "representative ideal", according to which newspapers reflect the concerns of the reading public and communicate those concerns to those in power (2004: 9). Content though suggests that these papers were heavily politicized and didactic and Hampton suggests that the irony of this construction is that it "effectively removed the "masses" from politics by public discussion" by speaking on their behalf (ibid).

For those who owned these titles the epoch was one in which the purpose of ownership also shifted, from one of a form of public service – exemplified by Hampton's conception of the "educational ideal" (2004: 9) – to one in which proprietorship was a business and journalism a trade or profession (Lee 1978: 118). News gathering and newspaper production were increasingly professionalised, using the then new technologies of the telegraph and railway, although the exact nature of what it meant to be a journalist was highly contested in a debate which still continues (for instance Hampton, 2006: Conboy 2011).

The impact of New Journalism

The next stage of development marks the emergence of key professional conventions, including the Inverted Pyramid. This is a narrative structure, usually for hard news,

according to which the key information is included at the top of the story, which has come to define, and normalize, the practice of the journalist. For Pöttker this presentation improved the "communicative" (2005:63) power of news as titles sought to attract mass readerships. Matheson (2000) suggests this content formed a recognisable "news discourse", where information was presented in the third person and as 'fact' and in a recognisable news style.

Although objectivity has been identified as a professional standard for American journalists at this time, the same was not true for either the English national or provincial papers. Hampton (2008) argues extensively that the English newspaper remained partisan in stance, while valuing standards of factual accuracy and 'fair play'– resulting in a characterisation of the newspaper as "watchdog". For the provincial press this notion was refined so that increasingly the local newspaper positioned itself as speaking for its local community (Taylor 2006).

These shifts in content and presentation are concomitant with an increased focus on commercialisation. In turn, these values informed and influenced other aspects of newspaper practice to produce the style of newspaper termed 'New Journalism'. The term here describes the increased commercialisation of the content of the English newspaper, including "a lightness of tone, and emphasis on the personal and the "sensational" and reliance on gimmicks to sell newspapers in high-stakes circulation wars." (Hampton 2004: 37). While historians of the press debate the extent and dates of this transformation, Hampton persuasively argues that for those involved the reassessment of journalism practice was very real (Hampton 2004: 38).

Innovations in local newspaper content included the journalistic interview and improved production in terms of design, layout and the inclusion of pictures (Conboy 2004: 15). The changes probably followed trends established by the national newspaper industry although Walker suggests the waning of local political power prompted the provincial newspaper to reassess its content (2006: 384). Improved transport links brought London titles to the provinces in time for breakfast and the printing of London titles in the regions meant local titles had to differentiate themselves to maintain a market share (Packer 2006). A study of the *Midland Daily Telegraph* between 1895 and 1905 shows the title developing commercially to promote itself as an advertising medium within a defined circulation area. The relevance of editorial content to the newspaper's circulation area was also emphasised by improved labelling in headlines and sub decks. This made the title appear more local, although the actual amount of space devoted to local stories remained stable (Matthews, forthcoming). A significant area for development was local sport, which cemented a paper's relationship with its community and offered marketing opportunities via sponsorship and sporting supplements.

The growth of chain control

The period of 1914 to 1976 may be best understood in terms of an analysis of the business structure of provincial newspapers. Commercially motivated owners consolidated their positions by buying multiple titles to create monopolistic business models within defined circulation areas. As such, the industry came to be dominated by a few, huge enterprises. Among these was Northcliffe Newspapers, part of the Daily Mail and General Trust, which in 1947 owned titles within a network of

concomitant regions including the south west and Wales (Bristol, Cheltenham, Gloucester and Swansea), the Midlands (Lincoln, Leicester, Stoke on Trent and Derby) and on Humberside (Hull and Grimsby) (Camrose 1947: 53). Equally significant were Kemsley newspapers, Provincial newspapers, and the Westminster Press, formed through mergers and acquisitions among a close-knit group of associates. Between 1921 and 1946 these groups increased their total holding of titles from just under 15 per cent of total titles to nearly 43 per cent (Royal Commission 1947-1949: Appendix IV). This consolidation of ownership was interrupted only by the restrictions imposed by two world wars, which, while significant, are outside of the scope of this study.

Murdock and Golding (1978) cite the first quarter of the twentieth century as the period in which the national press, as we understand it became established. This created a competitive backdrop for the fight for dominance between provincial newspaper titles. Best equipped were those large companies who could resource costly circulation wars, often via the evening paper – a highly refined and profitable commercial product. The result was a fall in the overall number of daily titles from 196 in 1900 to 169 in 1920 as competitors were closed. At the same time circulations – and profits – increased, making this a battle worth fighting. By 1974 the top 10 newspaper groups controlled 81 per cent of all provincial newspaper circulations. Increasingly these companies were structured in terms of "publishing centres' from which multiple titles were produced in order to control costs and maximise profits (Hartley et al 1977: 31).

Lee (1976) has characterised this era as one in which the philanthropic ideal underpinning the ownership of the Victorian press gives way to ownership for profit alone. This resulted in an increasing polarisation between the 'millionaire owners' and the artisan workforce, which drew on the discursive construction of the press as a democratic organ to oppose consolidation. By 1931, of 9,000 journalists and photographers employed in newspapers, some 6,600 were members of the National Union of Journalists; a further 2,700 were members of the Institute of Journalists (PEP 1938: 12-13). These two organisations epitomised competing constructions of journalism respectively between those who saw it as it an open trade and those who sought to define it as a profession, protected by Royal Charter. The print shops, employing 29,000 men, were nearly totally unionised, usually via membership of the London Society of Compositors or the National Society of Operative Printers and Assistants (Natsopa) (PEP 1938: 15-16). These unions campaigned for improved pay and conditions and the NUJ pay structure recognised the career path of journalists who trained on local titles before progressing to national newspapers. The interests of employers were represented by the Newspaper Proprietors' Association (later to become the Newspaper Publishers Association) formed in 1908, the continuation of the Newspaper Society for provincial owners and editors, and the formation of the Joint Industrial Council to negotiate with the unions. This polarisation of employee and employer was probed, somewhat inconclusively, in no fewer than three Royal Commissions into press ownership between 1947 and 1977. The first responded to calls from the NUJ which argued that consolidation threatened the freedom of the press; the union sought to emphasise this role by co-operating with the Newspaper Society to set standards for training and conduct.

Writing of the regional press in the inter-war years, Bromley and Hayes suggest that this commercial context acted as a liberating force, creating a 'democracy of print'. Coinciding with a 'golden age' for local government, regional papers "offered *the ubiquitous civic voice*: vital yet distanced from partisanship" scrutinising and holding to account those in power (2002: 197). However, they suggest this attempt to reconcile distant ownership with an editorial focus on the "parish pump" is essentially paradoxical. Franklin and Murphy (1991) go further, reducing the ideological construction of the provincial press as a community watchdog to a functional tool which aligns the interests and definitions of that community with commercial success; as such it is open to compromise for the interests of profit.

The move to computerised production and the advent of free newspapers

Industrial relations within the provincial newspaper industry were radically restructured by the introduction of computerised production methods in the 1970s and 1980s. The innovations were made against a backdrop of rising production costs and increased competition for advertising revenue, from television, radio and the then new media platforms such as Oracle and Ceefax, which prefigured the arrival of the digital newspaper. Newspapers were also increasingly the products of diversified businesses, for which publishing was just one interest among many. Reed International Ltd, for instance, produced paint, furniture and wallpaper as well as books and newspapers, via subsidiaries as far afield as Australia, Canada and South Africa (Hartley et al 1977: 141).

These innovations, which enabled journalists to typeset their own text, enabled titles to reduce wage costs significantly by emasculating the once-dominant print unions.

This was facilitated by the Conservative Thatcher administration, which sought to challenge the power of the unions in Britain. This political stance was backed by anti-union legislation – including the Employment Acts of 1980 and 1982 - which restricted the rights of unions to picket and enabled employers to take action for damages against them. This was tested by a dispute between Eddie Shah and the print unions in Warrington (Gennard 1990: 485).

Computerisation also enabled the production of free newspaper titles, ranging from 'shopper' titles which carried adverts alone, to sophisticated newspapers indistinguishable from their paid-for counterparts. Goodhart and Wintour (1986) chart the origin of the free newspaper in the UK back to Lionel Pickering, who brought the newspaper form from Australia where it was well established. He set up the *Derby Trader* in 1966 with just £4,800 in capital; by 1986 he had 10 titles turning over £10 million a year with a 10 per cent profit margin (ibid: 86). Most free titles were run on a shoestring with minimal editorial and administration costs, yet offered blanket coverage of an area to advertisers.

Such was the success of the free newspaper business model that established companies adopted it, including Reed Regional Newspapers, which by 1991 was published 100 free titles with an aggregate circulation of 5.8 million. Reed launched a free daily title in 1984, the Birmingham-based *Daily News*, which at its peak employed around 40 journalists. Although the number of free titles fluctuated with the economic climate, Franklin and Murphy (1991) cite a total of 1,156 titles in 1991 with a circulation of 43.5 million.

The first fully computerised newspaper in England was the *Reading Evening Post*, which was created from a pre-existing weekly title by Thomson Regional Newspapers Ltd (Royal Commission 1977 140OE1: 42). Arguments around the introduction of new technology focussed on the effect on skilled labour, particularly the print workers represented by the National Graphic Association, who were effectively made redundant by the move to "direct input" by editorial and advertising workers (Gennard 1990). The status of editorial workers might at this point have increased because of their centrality to the production process and the NUJ was successful in implementing agreements in a substantial number of workplaces (Noon 1991). However, the greater demands were not met by greater salaries (Franklin and Murphy 1991: 14) because the free newspaper had effectively undermined the relationship between editorial quality and circulations. For Simpson (1981) editorial became one cost to be controlled among many and this disruption subsumed the social role of newspaper to one of profit alone. This paved the way for the "asset-stripping" mentality of conglomerates, exemplified by Reed International which reduced two weekly papers staffed by 25 people to one free sheet with one reporter (Franklin and Murphy 1991: 50). In this way, the promise of new technology to potentially increase the plurality of provincial newspaper titles was not realised. Instead publishers increased dominance in a local market by rationalising products and widening the area of their monopolistic hold. This resulted in a provincial press which was increasingly homogenized and less local.

The provincial press in the digital age

The challenges faced by the provincial newspaper industry to date, stem from the disruption brought by the advent of the digital age to the dual business model of selling news to readers and readers to advertisers. Local news can be accessed online for free but advertisers have not followed, reducing the revenue stream of the "print pound" to the "digital penny" (House of Commons 2013: 3). This disruption has been exacerbated by the global recession which has affected advertising revenues. Nel (2013) charts this decline in the context of the Johnston Press. In 2007, the company owned 315 local and regional newspapers, of which 18 were daily titles; by 2012, this had fallen by 29 per cent to 13 daily and 214 weekly papers and staff had nearly halved from 7,538 to 3,960. Print advertising fell sharply from £425.8 million to £181.3 million while digital revenues rose from £15.1 million to £20.6 million in the same period (ibid: 9).

This current decline has prompted those dire warnings, such as that analyst Enders who predicted a 50 per cent fall in the number of regional newspaper titles between 2007 and 2013 (Nel 2013: 9). The forecast is predicated largely on a continued strategy of increased integration and consolidation of titles by the major companies noted above. This operational cost-cutting extended to reduction in staffing levels, the closure of local offices and centralisation, for instance with the concentration of production into "regional hubs", typified by that created by Newsquest in Newport to produce its Welsh and Gloucestershire titles (Hollander: 2013). For critics the effect of these changes is a local press which is "local" in name only. Bob Franklin (2006) charts the increasing reliance of journalists on information subsidies, such as press releases, which inhibits their ability to scrutinise local power holders. More recently he suggests that news which is free at the point of delivery needs to be cheap to

produce – so repurposed rather than original – leaving democratically significant areas such as councils and court out too costly to cover (2012: 601).

This has sparked concerns over the ability of local titles to serve the interests of their communities, which has in turn has prompted a re-imagining of the structure and form of the provincial news industry. Innovations include changes in the form of ownership of traditional titles, exemplified by the *West Highland Free Press*, which was bought by its employees in 2009. On a larger scale is Local World Limited a new company formed in 2012 from a partnership between Iliffe News and Media and Northcliffe Media, with Trinity Mirror holding a stake. Sir Ray Tindle, among the top 10 publishers of local newspapers in Britain, has an 'ultra-local' philosophy, typified by his approach to the *Tenby Observer*, which was rescued through an insistence on content about Tenby only.

Increasing dissemination of content across digital and mobile platforms has a consequence for the both the content of those products and the working practices of the journalists producing them. Reporters are already expected to produce content across platforms (Skillset 2007) and increasingly will be expected to edit and publish their own work, subverting the traditional chain of reporter-news editor-subeditor-editor. Organising content produced from other sources is also expected to become part of the reporter's workload. These changes, like the introduction of direct input before, are not being made without opposition. In May 2013 Local World chairman, David Montgomery, caused consternation when he described journalists going out on a story as 'wasteful' and instead envisioned them as content managers and publishers (House of Commons 2013: 4).

Research by the Media Trust (2010) suggests the need for "local quality news and journalism" is a crucial factor in enabling people to access information about where they live and identify with those around them. Trying to meet this need has led to an explosion in hyperlocal news providers. The vast majority of these operate via websites or mobile apps, which may concentrate on just one postcode area. Research suggests there were 432 active hyperlocal websites in May 2012 but acknowledges that it is a "dynamic" environment which shifts on a daily basis (Harte 2012: 2). These news forms have attracted interest and funding from charitable and research sources because of the perceived solution they offer for the provision of local information. These sites are not necessarily staffed by professional journalists, or even by people who see themselves journalists (Jones and Salter 2012: 99). This signals a move to a "mixed economy journalism", where non-professional 'citizen journalists' form networks with the professionals who collect and curate the news flow.

Conclusion.

The latest challenges placed upon provincial news industry by digital technology have far reaching implications not only for the business model of that industry, but also for those who work within it and what expectations of them. Canter suggests the very nature of the Journalist's "top-down" approach to information dissemination is restructured by web 2.0 technology, which has transformed readers into "pro-sumers, contributors and collaborators" (2013: 4). It is this networked, digital environment in which journalism has come to operate, which is challenging its relationship with its

audience and ultimately the role of the journalist and the even those who may be defined as journalists (Franklin 2012: 599).

Conboy (2004:3) suggests that understanding journalism as a discursive process enables us to consider its concrete forms, including the provincial press, as social objects whose definition is a manifestation of the operation of those competing for power. This approach to the regional press enables us to examine claims which the journalism profession would have us take as constant principles, such as that of existing to promote the 'good of the town' or that of the local paper as the 'watchdog' of the local arena. This is particularly useful at times of change such as now, when these roles are being challenged and contested. Instead we can examine whose interests claims to an historic continuity serve, which in turn informs the debate about the significance of change. As Conboy (ibid: 7) suggests, "the present forms of journalism bear all the hallmarks of these historical influences. That is why history is so important to understanding the journalism of the present day".

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Further Reading

Bob Franklin has written extensively on the local press. His work with David Murphy *What News? The Market, Politics and the Local Press* (Routledge 1991) remains an accessible and thought-provoking assessment of the significance of local papers. His edited volume *Local Journalism and Local Media* (Routledge 1998) brings together a range of a scholars to explore the issues in this area. Mark Hampton's *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850-1950* (University of Illinois 2004) employs an historical approach to analyse our understanding of newspapers.